

PICTORIAL EXPERIENCE

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It. *Esperienza di immagine*; Fr. *Expérience d'image*; Germ. *Bilderfahrung*; Span. *Experiencia de imagen*.

Pictures are created objects that have the function of generating a perceptual experience. In this sense, they are “experiential artifacts” (Terrone forthcoming). The experience elicited by pictures – usually visual (but for non-visual pictorial experience see e.g. Lopes 1997) – is a composite perceptual experience, in which the “perception” of the depicted scene (which is not in front of us) is generated by and experienced along the perception of the marked surface (the object that is actually in front of us). This experience is usually called a “pictorial experience”. A philosophical analysis of such an experience amounts to answering the following questions: How should we describe the phenomenology of pictorial experience? *What is it like* to experience pictures? How should the “perception” of the depicted scene be characterized? Is it really a form of perception? How does it relate to the perception of the marked surface?

SEEING AS, SEEING-IN, EXPERIENCE RESEMBLANCE, AND MAKE-BELIEVE

For Gombrich (1960), images have the function of generating an alternation of simple perceptions, the veridical perception of the marked surface and the illusory perception of the depicted scene. In Gombrich’s view, pictorial experience is the experience of seeing the picture *as* its subject. Indeed, he compares picture perception with the phenomenon of aspect-switching or “seeing as”. As in the perceptually ambiguous duck-rabbit picture one can see that figure either as a duck or as a rabbit but never experience the two aspects at the same time, in pictorial experience either one sees the picture as a marked surface, or one sees the picture as a depicted scene. For Gombrich, the experience of the marked surface and the experience of the depicted scene are incompatible.

Richard Wollheim (1980) attacks Gombrich’s view of pictorial experience on exactly this ground: it is not the case that a spectator can only *alternate* between the experience of the surface and the experience of the content it represents. On the contrary, what is distinctive about pictorial experience is exactly the *simultaneous* awareness of the marks on a picture’s surface and the scene it represents. In these terms, pictorial experience is defined by Wollheim as a “seeing-in” experience – when we face a picture, we see the picture’s subject *in* a marked surface. And seeing-in experiences – that are not confined to pictures:

e.g. we can see landscapes or faces in the stains on an old wall – are experiences with a *sui generis* phenomenology, which he calls “twofoldness”. A viewer looking at a picture, Wollheim maintains, undergoes a “twofold” experience: on one hand, she is visually aware of the flat surface of the picture; on the other, she experiences the subject matter of the picture. Wollheim called the first of these folds of seeing-in the ‘configurational’ fold, and the second the ‘recognitional’ fold, and claims that these are two distinguishable but “inseparable” aspects of a single visual experience, and not two experiences somehow combined (Wollheim 2003).

As Voltolini (2015, 74) remarks, “according to Wollheim, over and above ascertaining the folds’ inseparability, nothing more can be said in order to qualify the seeing-in experience, which therefore remains utterly ordinary on the one hand and quite mysterious on the other”. After Wollheim, two strands of theories have tried to define this experience more precisely: experienced resemblance theories on the one hand (e.g. Peacocke 1987; Hopkins 1998), and make-believe theories on the other (Walton 1990).

Robert Hopkins (1998), who arguably develops the most refined version of an experienced resemblance account, maintains that seeing-in is an experience of resemblance in *outline shape* between the marks on the surface of a picture and the objects or scene they represent. By outline shape, Hopkins means “the shape things have if we ignore the dimension of depth” (Ibid., 147). He emphasizes that outline shape is “a genuine property of things in our environment” (Ibid., 148), and he also suggests that visual experience presents items as having outline shapes: “We do see outline shape, despite the apparently esoteric nature of that property” (Ibid., 60).

An alternative way of building on Wollheim’s seeing-in relies on imagination and is proposed by Kendall Walton (1990). Walton analyzes depiction in the framework of his general theory of representation and claims that (i) pictures are props in visual games of make-believe and that (ii) participation in such visual games is a complex perceptual and imaginative activity. In Walton’s view, pictorial experience consists in imagining our actual seeing the marked surface – the representational prop – to be a face-to-face seeing of the depicted scene. The empirical problems raised by Walton’s theory will be discussed in the last section. One further family of theories should now be introduced: threefold accounts of pictorial experience.

TWOFOLDNESS OR THREEFOLDNESS?

Recently, the debate around the notion of pictorial experience has seen a resurgence of positions that, directly or indirectly, stem from Edmund Husserl’s theory of depiction – especially from his 1904/5 lectures *Phantasy and Image Consciousness* (Husserl 2005). In contrast to Wollheim’s twofoldness thesis, Husserl is taken to hold a threefold account of pictorial experience (see e.g. Kurg 2014). In fact, he describes the experience of seeing something in a picture – what he calls image consciousness – as involving three objects: the physical image [*das physische Bild*], i.e. the marked surface; the image object [*Bildobjekt*], i.e. what is seen in the surface; i.e. the image subject [*Bildsujet*], i.e. what the picture is about. Husserl talks about a black-and-white photo of a child to make his point. Here, the actual photo on paper – the physical image – is a real thing we can see and touch. But the child in the photo – the image object – is something

that “has never existed and never will exist” (2005, 21). It is just how the child looks in that picture, which can be quite different from the real child – the image subject. If, as it has been suggested (Eldridge 2018), Husserl takes image consciousness to be directed upon all such elements, then pictorial experience is not only twofold, but threefold.

It is not clear though, the extent to which, if any, the consciousness of the third fold, the image subject, is perceptual for Husserl (see Voltolini 2018, 91; and Wiesing 2010). In fact, Nanay (2018, 175) reads Husserl’s account as maintaining that the image subject is not perceived, but merely shows up in our judgment. The same goes, says Nanay, for a recent development of Husserl’s theory, Lambert Wiesing’s (2010) account. Indeed, for Wiesing, the image-carrier “displays” (Ibid., 35) the representation – or image-object which has a mere “artificial presence” – and is then related to the content, or image-subject. Appropriate image-subjects are those that resemble the image-object in certain respects (Ibid., 56). While the image-object is actually perceived, the image-subject is arguably non-perceptually apprehended. In this sense, however, the third fold plays the role that “the standard of correctness” plays in Wollheim’s twofold account, hence threefoldness risks to boil down to a reformulation of twofoldness. In contrast, other contemporary proponents of the threefold view defend the idea that we not only perceive the marked surface and the image-object, but also the image-subject as a third fold in a single unitary experience. For John Brough (2013) and Regina-Nino Kurg (2014), the image subject is given through seeing-in again: just as the image object is seen in the marked surface, the image subject is seen in the image object. Nanay (2018), quite independently from Husserl’s original idea or Brough’s, Kurg’s and Wiesing’s elaborations, also contends that picture perception is, at least sometimes, threefold. For him, the third fold, when it is represented, it is represented quasi-perceptually, through mental imagery. Voltolini (2018) argues against Nanay and the other threefoldness theorists that pictorial experience is always twofold: what is seen in a picture constrains its subject to be a subject of a certain kind, yet it does not force the latter to be pictorially perceived, not even indirectly. Yet, he acknowledges that to understand a picture in its complexity we need to appeal to three layers – its vehicle, what is seen in it, and its subject.

All in all, the debate on how to qualify pictorial experience is still open. Yet, while accounting for the content, structure, and phenomenology of experience is a typical philosophical endeavor, a sensible strategy and an increasingly endorsed perspective appeals to vision sciences, which study the phenomenon from different perspectives and with a different methodology. Following the suggestion that, to have a proper understanding of aesthetic experiences – and of mental phenomena in general – we should use a triangulation between three bodies of data, phenomenological, psychological, and neurophysiological (Smith 2017) the next section briefly spells out different ways of conjugating philosophical theories of pictorial experience with data from vision science.

PICTORIAL EXPERIENCE AND VISION SCIENCE

Regardless of one’s view on how philosophy and science relate, everyone should agree that a good philosophical theory must fit well with all the empirical data it tries to explain or interpret (Voltolini 2013, 45). On this ground, data from developmental psychology can be used in order to criticize Walton’s idea

that seeing-in images involve a special kind of make-believe. Since Walton's theory accounts for depiction by appealing to experiences that involve make-believe, it should follow that individuals that are unable to make believe cannot have such experiences. But developmental psychology shows that children may undergo "seeing-in" experiences at least three months before their manifestation of make-believe understanding (at the age of 8 months rather than at the age of 15). From an empirical point of view it is therefore doubtful that the experience of the depicted scene has to be interpreted as a make-believe perception, as Walton wishes (Voltolini 2013).

Empirical data can be used to criticize a theory, as we have just seen, but also to show how much a philosophical theory squares well with them. John Kulvicki (2013), for example, notes that while Wollheim's theory says little about how surfaces support the sui generis twofold experience, some psychologists have recently suggested how this might happen. As psychologists Reinhard Niederée and Dieter Heyer (2003) have shown, pictures present conflicting cues to our visual system. The monocular cues indicate depth while the binocular cues indicate a flat plane. Under these circumstances, Niederée and Heyer suggest that the visual system segregates the cues into subpercepts of distinct objects: the marked surface and the depictive content. These different subpercepts are not simply generated in isolation, but there are mutual interactions at various levels of processing. Yet another way to give empirical support to the twofoldness thesis comes from neurophysiology. Indeed, several philosophers including Mohan Matthen (2005, chap. 13) and Bence Nanay (2011), building on the framework of the dorso-ventral hypothesis, have proposed that objects in pictorial space are represented by the object-categorizing, ventral processing stream, while are not typically represented by the action-guiding, dorsal processing stream. Nanay, in particular, supports the idea that this difference in neuronal implementation is the neurophysiological basis of seeing-in and can explain the physical basis of twofoldness.

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